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The History of Bees by Maja Lunde

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A Look at Familial Colony Collapse

***The History of Bees* by MAJA LUNDE**

Touchstone, 2015 \$24.99

Reviewed by **KIRSTEN SCHUHMACHER**

A true testament to Lunde's abilities as a writer, *The History of Bees* spans nearly two hundred fifty years and three countries, none from which she hails. Still, her status as a sort of "armchair anthropologist" does not detract from the believability of the novel. Instead, it serves as a reminder that there is something familial about cultures' treatments and understandings of nature. There is a raw interconnectivity that crosses cultures, time, and species and reminds readers that these things are mere constructs.

The History of Bees, as a title, seems somewhat misleading. The book does not outline a "history of bees" or their extinction. It instead pulls into focus the human need to create controlled environments within the chaos of an anthropocentrically disordered world. For that, Lunde succeeds in telling three gripping narratives that work to intertwine nature and culture through a tirelessly overworked insect. And it isn't until the end, when the three stories are bound together through a book also titled *The History of Bees*, that readers are made aware of the characters' actual ties to each other: truly a hive unconcerned with time or space.

It goes without saying that this novel is best enjoyed outside and as far away from human distractions as possible. For me, I found a certain beauty to the spider crawling on my book while reading how, in a wax lid, a female bee "creates the cocoon, the larva spins it around itself, a protective

garment against everything and everyone. Here, and only here, she's alone" (147). Although the thought crossed my mind many times, it would be too far to say that I had a sort of "becoming-bee" experience while reading this novel. I, instead, postulated on how I was part of a larger organism that included the tree above, the spider on my book, the iron table I was reading on, the occasional bug that flew too close to my ear, and even the text itself. As a novel, *The History of Bees* works to remind readers that there is always a bigger picture.

As narrative, though, *The History of Bees* suspends readers in a constant state of frustration. And perhaps this is purposefully done to illustrate humanity's ever-slipping control on the natural world. Because, no matter the effort, the three principal characters all appear to fail on some level—in a way, anthropomorphizing Colony Collapse Disorder. Using this narrative, the novel attempts to juxtapose the many ways one can lose a child with the confusion caused by the Anthophilac phenomenon. It is this that makes the three narratives incredibly compelling. By looking at the disrupted familial unit as a type of "colony collapse," the novel does more than advocate for respectful agricultural land practices. It also contends that there is commonality between bees and humans that far exceeds the organismal. Their pain is our pain. Their loss is reflected in us.

On a practical level, the novel spends a good amount of time with description. This, as a minor detail, became somewhat of a distraction. I was lost trying to envision the hives, described as "impressive, every corner perfectly rounded, he had even gone so far as to add some beautiful carvings on the one side" (166). Because one of the narratives

focused nearly entirely on invention and scientific observation, I believe it would have been helpful to have illustrations for added clarity. The reader could look up the referenced illustrations to Reverend Langstroth's beehives, for example, but adding illustrations of them would create a more inclusive reading experience.

I can't help thinking of *The History of Bees* as part of a larger picture. Taken separately, there is little to be gleaned from each story. It is only as a group or colony of stories that real understanding can be found. The novel operates from the assumption that there is a cosmic chain of events that starts from the most inconspicuous of places and that there is truly nothing that can be done to change the course of history. The characters respond reactively to this chain, but I believe it is too far to argue that Lunde is calling for proactive agricultural shifts. The novel simply calls attention to the serious implications of agricultural management. By the end, I questioned whether bees were just a conduit to tell a larger story on exercising control.

Still, Lunde's debut novel is truly insightful and well-researched. It gives life as it is, regardless of time or space. Even the dystopian future she creates poses no challenge to identify with because of the characters' immediate needs and feelings. A joy to read, *The History of Bees* can appear overly simplistic, but its complexity comes once it is finished. The novel is one that stays with you far longer than it takes to read. And for that, it is entirely worthwhile.

KIRSTEN SCHUHMACHER traded the high desert of Northern Nevada for the temperate rainforest of Vancouver Island and is now currently a Master's student at the University of Victoria.